

Rehearsal?

By Capt. Joe Cleary

A hail of gunfire erupted, and the tracers ripped through the darkness as the machine-gun section fired on a hill. First platoon launched their attack on objective-alpha, a nearby clearing. A few minutes later, they signaled they had seized their objective.

Meanwhile, several hundred meters away, second platoon maneuvered swiftly through the hilly terrain to close in on their objective, which was the same hill the machine guns were firing on. They had arrived at their last concealed position and were waiting for the gunfire to stop before rushing into the attack when someone yelled cease-fire over the radio.

Startled by the unexpected call, the company commander, who was a major, radioed back, "Who called it and why?" No one answered, so the major ordered the attack to resume. Immediately after the machine-gun fire resumed, someone again shouted cease-fire over the radio. The call came from second platoon, and they said a Marine was hurt.

The company commander and corpsman ran from the machine gun position to the scene to discover that a 7.62 mm round from one of the machine guns had hit a lance corporal. The round had torn through one of his buttocks and hip. The platoon commander, who was a captain, also was injured; a round had hit his flak jacket, leaving a large bruise on his side.

After reviewing this incident, investigators found that the captain of the second platoon had walked his Marines into the impact area when he got lost trying to find the platoon's designated covered position. Before the attack and sunset, the company commander and first platoon commander had walked the terrain.

However, the second-platoon commander decided not to accompany them because he felt confident about where he was going. He explained that he already had maneuvered over the terrain earlier that day during platoon attacks. Furthermore, the captain didn't bother using a guide, pace-count or compass to help navigate.

The reserve rifle company didn't rehearse the night-live-fire-attack. As a result, their coordination failed when they needed it most. Because of the darkness, the company commander and machine-gun section couldn't see that second platoon had wandered into the cone of fire. To make matters worse, the section didn't have clear fields of fire. Numerous trees and brush obstructed their view and rounds, making ricochets more likely.

After talking with the Marines in second platoon, investigators concluded that most of them didn't know the route, their designated last-covered or concealed position, or the signal plan. It wasn't surprising to discover these facts, considering the captain never briefed them before the attack.

A live-fire exercise at night is a risky operation. By skipping rehearsals and briefs, a unit increases the likelihood of a grave mistake; in training, it's not a risk worth taking.

There are many lessons to be learned from this story. Perhaps the greatest lesson is to have positive-communication. When someone calls cease-fire, don't assume anything. Find out who and why they called it, even if you have to hike to the front lines and get face-to-face to make an informed decision. There is no substitute for positive communication. ●

No, Thank You!

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